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To test a restructured version of the Simmelian theory of conflict, which holds that conflict can result in conciliation, cooperation, and other benefits, interviews were conducted with 14 leaders of metropolitan community groups who had been active in five separate conflict situations with the local board of education. The objective of the study was to understand the resultant attitudes of these people in an attempt to ascertain whether or not the experience was beneficial to them. Nineteen negative and 11 positive elements were extracted from the interview replies, with a frequency of 64 negative and 50 positive elements. These findings indicate that conflict between the schools and their communities should be avoided because of the dominance of dysfunctional elements. However, the gratification derived from conflict by certain individuals suggests that conflict eruption needs empirical investigation before one can safely generalize concerning its benefits. A 35-item bibliography is included. (HW)

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CONFLICT AND SCHOOL - COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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CONFLICT THEORY AND SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Introduction

In 1950, Jessie Bernard asked, "Where is the modern sociology of conflict?"[1] Prior to that time, little had been done to extend the conflict theories of Georg Simmel (1859-1918). More currently, applications of Simmelian postulates have been formulated not only in sociology, but in psychology, economics, and political science.[2]

Since Bernard's statement, educators have coincidently experienced a proliferation of school-community[3] tensions. Gross found that 71 percent of superintendents in the state of Massachusetts were pressured on two sides by groups that made demands incompatible with one another;[4] more recently conflict has been observed in a variety of foci such as religion, segregation, finance, and curriculum. Corwin offers another direction for conflict investigation when he "suggests that there is a consistent pattern of conflict between teachers

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[1]Jessie Bernard, "Where is the Modern Sociology of Conflict?" American Journal of Sociology, LVI (July, 1950), 411-424.

[2]The reader is directed to the works of Berlyne, D.E., Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity, Boulding, K.E., Conflict and Defense, Coleman, J., Community Conflict, Schelling, T.C., The Strategy of Conflict (and others) with complete references appearing in the bibliography.

[3]The term "community" is defined here as a group of people having like interests and sharing a geographically defined area.

[4]Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason, and Alexander W. McEachen, Explorations in Role Analysis (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), pp. 261-262.

and administrators over control of work, and that professionalization is a militant process."[5]

Despite these frictions, people in education still expound the Simmelian hypothesis regarding the desirability of such events. A board of education member in one of the largest cities in the United States was paraphrased in the press:

> Furthermore, he believes such controversy serves a useful purpose. If both parties in the clash have a strong support in the community, and their conflict is resolved, it helps drain off community tension in a harmless manner.[6]

This statement is based upon the assumption that the resolution of conflict will satisfactorily drain off antagonisms even though the processes of conflict are premised upon the defeat of one of the parties. Further investigation seems warranted.

This kind of problem can generally be examined in two ways; an entire city such as Pasadena or Scarsdale or a school district within an urban complex similar to New York or Detroit. Irrespective of the geographic differences indicated above, it would appear that the school-community arena contains fertile ground for an assessment of Simmel's theories and those of his contemporary interpreter, Lewis A. Coser.[7]

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[5]Ronald G. Corwin, "Professional Persons in Public Organizations." Educational Administration Quarterly, I (August, 1965), 15.

[6]Harvey Ford, "Detroit School Argument Revives An Old Question." Toledo Blade, June 28, 1964, p. B-3.

[7]Lewis A. Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956). See also, Lewis A. Coser, Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

In this paper, the term conflict denotes a clash of incompatible interests between individuals and/or groups in which two or more human beings or groups actively seek to thwart each other's purposes, to prevent satisfaction of each other's interests.[8]

It should not be inferred that conflict studies are designed with the hope of eliminating this phenomenon from human life because this is not the intent. "Social conflict is here to stay"[9] but the examination of its functional and dysfunctional[10] manifestations should more adequately contribute to its control and management. An absence of conflict would denote a utopian mutuality stagnated by the dogmatic belief that evaluation and potential improvement of the culture were unnecessary. The dynamics of human interaction and individuality suggest the improbability of such an occurrence. Furthermore, the desirability of utopia is militated against in our society because of the generally accepted value system which endorses the improvement of the existing state of affairs. Contained therein however, is a "basic ingredient" for conflict - namely, disruption of the status quo.[11] If coercion is coupled with change then conflict might also become a rebellion against such coercion.[12]

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[8]Influenced by Henry Platt Fairchild, Dictionary of Sociology (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), p. 50.

[9]Lloyd and Elaine Cook, Intergroup Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1954), p. 272.

[10]The functional aspects are those which promote sociation patterns and the (mutually agreed) successful conclusion of the conflict. Obviously, the dysfunctional would be the opposite.

[11]In fact, a study of eighteen communities led Gamson to state that "the absence of rancorous conflict is no necessary sign of an 'ideal' community." See William A. Gamson, "Rancorous Conflict in Community Politics," American Sociological Review. XXXI (February, 1966), p. 81.

[12]Burt N. Adams, "Coercion and Consensus Theories: Some Unresolved Issues," American Journal of Sociology, CXXI (May, 1966), 717.

Review of the Literature

Assuming the continued existence of conflict, critical significance is attached to understanding its functions and dysfunctions in order to understand if these processes have any value to society. Both Simmel and Coser endorse the more favorable aspects of conflict relationships. Simmel claims that "the negative and dualistic elements play an entirely positive role in this more comprehensive picture, despite the destruction they may work on a particular occasion."[13] Coser is somewhat less emphatic when he claims that conflicts within groups "are by no means altogether disruptive factors.... Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and persistence of group life."[14] By the use of the words "altogether" and "necessarily," Coser appears more willing than Simmel to acknowledge the possibility that conflict might be negative and dysfunctional. Again, eleven years later, Coser's position remains basically unchanged as he suggests the need to "conteract the popular view that deviance is necessarily dysfunctional for the social structure (and stress) the latent functional contributions of the deviant role."[15]

Few writers have been located who attempt to weigh and contrast the positive and negative elements essential to conflict. Lawner divides her analysis into constructive and destructive conflict. Destructive social conflict is defined as "opposition between groups which serves to impede the democratic process"[16] while constructive social conflict is the converse:

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[13]Georg Simmel, Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955), p. 17.

[14]Coser, Functions, op. cit., p. 31.

[15]Coser, Continuities, op. cit., p. 12.

[16]Rhoda Lydia Lawner, "Social Conflict as a Subject of Investigation in American Research from 1919 to 1953," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1956, p. 1 abstract.

Constructive

1. People gain experience in democratic human relations.
2. Opposing groups will explore the viewpoint of the other end.
3. Share in problem solving attitudes.
4. The necessary, wholesome, and desirable controversy of opinion.
5. Not destructive to the opponent.
6. Positive rather than negative attempts to influence the thought of others.
7. The conflict is educational, in that it leads to increased knowledge and understanding of the facts involved in the controversial issue.
8. Will lead to improved aspects of community life.

Destructive

1. Verbal or physical attempts to subvert opponent.
2. Curtail opponent's access to information, his freedom of thought, and freedom of action.
3. Lack of democratic processes because both sides are not permitted equal time.
4. It is non educational because it breeds confusion and distrust.
5. It intensifies existing undesirable conditions.[17]

If constructive and destructive conflict approximates the functional and dysfunctional elements in this study, then it would appear that Lawner endorses the former aspects of conflict.

Dahrendorf regards conflict as necessary in fostering "the stability of social system."[18]

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[17] Ibid., pp. 7-11.

[18] Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 207.

There has been, on the other hand, from other reputable sources, the belief that conflict is not beneficial to society. Contrary to the beliefs of the Simmelian school, doubts have been raised regarding the nature of group integration and interaction because of participation in conflict. When a person or group discovers that their values are not accepted by the community as a whole, the result is devastating. Little evidence of group satisfaction or rapport toward the schools has been exemplified by conflict groups. James Coleman reports:

> As controversy develops associations flourish within each group, but wither between persons on opposing sides. People break off long-standing relationships and (stop) speaking to former friends who have been drawn to the opposition.[19]

The postulate that "conflict as well as cooperation has social functions"[20] is supported. However, the debate being considered here centers around the Simmelian theory that "conflict is designed to resolve divergent dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity, even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflicting parties."[21] The use of the word "annihilation" is somewhat inappropriate when discussing school-community relations because it conveys the connotation of physical death to the individual or groups. For our purposes, Simmel's hypothesis might be restructured to state, "Although the demands of a parental pressure group cannot be resolved, the mere fact that the group has met with school officials reveals that a unity has been established, even though the group fails to succeed in its drive and later disbands."

Therefore, is it to be inferred that this sort of social action has successfully implemented conflict processes? Is there not some justification for the

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[19]James S. Coleman, Community Conflict (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), p. 11.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Simmel, op. cit., p. 13.

hope that conflict might ideally involve conciliation and cooperation? Is the establishment of an alleged unity (parent group vs. Board of Education), per ipse, a prima facie case for the socialization benefits of conflict? It would appear that some sort of empirical justification for such an assertion is in order.

Procedure

Objectives

The general objective of this study was to understand the resultant attitudes of people who became involved in school-community conflict in an attempt to ascertain whether or not the experience was beneficial to them. However, a methodological problem confronted the investigator in attempting to cope with the matter of positive (functional) and negative (dysfunctional) elements.

Both Simmel and Coser, however, contend that negative and positive elements cannot be subtracted from each other in order to decide which predominate within a given situation.[22] The reason for this rationale rests upon the premise that conflict is a unity such as life. It is concurred that such a point is reasonable, but argued that the sum of the elements creates this existing unity. Assuming the "realness" of conflict, it would appear that "aspects of reality must be subtracted for purposes of analysis."[23] Therefore, the elements can be conceptually extracted from the unity and held up for verification and judged on the merits of perceived affect by participating individuals. By so doing, the social functions of conflict and cooperation can be evaluated more thoroughly within a given context.

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[22]Simmel, op. cit., p. 17.

[23]Bredemeier and Stephenson, op. cit., p. 1.

Other objectives focused upon answering questions: (1) Can both parties be satisfied with the results of a conflict although the process implicitly contains the hope of destroying the opposition? (2) Is it possible for school officials to quell the incompatible demands of dissident parents' groups in such a way that the malcontents can withdraw from the conflict content that THEY had been recalcitrant? (3) Is it possible for defeated dissident groups to divest themselves of their residual bitterness in defeat and support their schools without further bias?

Sample

In order to investigate these questions, depth interviews were carried out with fourteen leaders of metropolitan community groups who had been active in five separate conflict situations with the local board of education. Although no membership lists as such were maintained, it can be estimated that these leaders had the support of about two thousand families. It was hoped to discover how these persons perceived the situation, not only for themselves but how the conflict activity effected the cohesiveness of their respective groups.

Findings

A total of nineteen negative and eleven positive elements were extracted from the interviews in view of respondent replies. The principal negative responses were as follows with frequency in parenthesis:

Intergroup cleavage (9) -- "Group 'X' is a 'rubber stamp' of the board of education. They failed to cooperate with our cause."

Nonnegotiability of board (8) -- "The board will do as it pleases."

Personal animosity (7) -- "The superintendent is a 'professional buck passer.'"

Competency questions (4) -- "The board of education and their staff do not do their jobs correctly."

Lack of recourse (4) -- "There was no one to turn to once the board refused us."

Sincerity rejection (4) -- "We cannot believe what school officials say."

The principal positive responses were:

Conciliation reached (8) -- "The school made an accomodating adjustment."

Individual satisfaction (8) -- "I found the involvement a satisfying experience."

Educational enlightenment (7) -- "I've developed an understanding of school problems and operations."

Democratic appreciation (6) -- "I learned how to utilize democratic processes.

Community cohesion (5) -- "The community worked together in trying to solve a common problem."

A total of sixty-four negative and fifty positive elements were located.

DISCUSSION

In other environments of sociation, conflict appears desirable and functional. However, if school-community relations' programs are premised on improved relationships between home and school, then conflict situations should be avoided because of their damaging nature. When they inevitably occur, structured pathways should be explored to ameliorate the problem expeditiously and fairly.

Little has been revealed here to alter the postulates of Simmel who believes that ANY form of sociation is beneficial for society. He claims, "Since discord unfolds its negatively, destructive character between particular individuals, we naively conclude that it must have the same effect on the total group."[24] It is difficult to agree with Simmel that sociation per se is ALWAYS desirable.

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[24]Simmel, op. cit., p. 17.

In the school-community conflicts studied, the conflicts did not result in interactions that were conducive to improved rapport between the disputants although Minar states "that the reduction of public conflict is something of an ideal toward which school systems tend."[25] It has been maintained by Simmel and others that because conflict brings people together in problem solving, it is beneficial to society. However, it has been shown that within community conflict groups interpersonal frictions developed over the means that the group would utilize in fighting the board of education. The conflict failed to improve cohesiveness; in fact one interviewee reported that she "got sick and tired of seeing other people under conditions of stress."

The optimistic conflict theorist hopes that such controversies will bring people and groups together and lead "to the formation of associations and coalitions between previously unrelated parties."[26] This might have been the case at the inception of some of the disputes, but later many individuals would be more than pleased to see the relationships terminate.

Conflict situations seem more likely to promote cleavages between neighborhood groups. There were numerous examples of certain groups that supported the board of education against the dissidents causing local frictions. Even when this happened, it is possible to cite a lack of satisfaction. The people in this kind of community, both the "winners" and the "losers," will "never forget" and, in retrospect, wish they had never become involved.

It must be maintained that when relations of a certain kind result in residual bitterness, tension, animosity, and lasting cleavages, the dysfunctions of conflict have prevailed. Therefore, it would have been more advantageous to society if such relationships had never been formed in the first place.

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[25]David W. Minar, "The Community Basis of Conflict in School System Politics." American Sociological Review, XXXI (December 1966), 825.

[26]Coser, op. cit., p. 140.

Such findings do imply long run social losses which counter Coser's statement: "What is distasteful in its immediate impact must also, almost by definition, be socially undesirable in its long-range effect."[27]

CONCLUSIONS

It is not to be inferred from these findings that conflict in modern society is undesirable because in many environments of sociation conflict appears quite necessary. The quest of the Negro for equal rights would have been hindered without conflict. The drive to organize labor likewise would have been restricted. But the findings of this study indicate that conflict between the schools and their communities should be avoided because of the dominance of dysfunctional elements. Although this general conclusion seems supportable, the paradoxical nature of conflict is indicated by the personally gratifying experience gleaned from particular problem situations for certain individuals. What must be suggested, therefore, is that any conflict eruption needs empirical investigation before one can safely generalize concerning the benefits derived from such an occurrence. This position appears reinforced in a recent review of Coser's latest work by Dibble who submits "that it is probably not possible to have a theory of conflict in general."[28] Although the term "conflict" is a convenient abstraction, identifiable elements permit the investigation of the phenomenon in a particular kind of setting. From particular settings then can new theory be developed.

Conflict must be accepted in our modern society. Parsons calls it "endemic" as it exists similar to diseases.[29] It is with us so we must learn to live with it and control it. The schools would seem to be better

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[27]Coser, Continuities, op. cit., p. 74.

[28]Vernon K. Dibble, Book review of Coser's "Continuities," American Sociological Review, 33 (August, 1968), 634.

[29]Talcott Parsons, "Social Classes and Class Conflict," American Economic Review, XXXIX (May, 1949), 25.

off without it but since it is impossible to annilihate, the schools, too, must learn to live with and control conflict processes.

Corwin suggests that:

> If conflict is a routine and normal occurrence within the administrative process, then administrative training programs should address themselves systematically to the proper role of conflict--its positive as well as its negative functions.[30]

Also, it is not to be inferred that honest criticism and reasonable citizen activity be deleted from the educational enterprise. Citizens must always have the right to express opinions and offer recommendations for corrective action by the administration. When such conditions present themselves, school authorities need to have avenues of approach to implement in order that the dysfunctional elements are kept from predominating. If and when this happens, school-community conflict might be regarded as an aid to educational progress.

[30]Corwin, op. cit., p. 18.

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